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Introduction

CHAPTER 1

Studying the English Language

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What does the study of the English language involve? Any book on the English language must address this question, as the answer will determine its contents. This, however, is a very tricky question to answer. A glance at the contents lists of other books on the English language will find variation, and sometimes quite dramatic variation. Perhaps it may seem self-evident and unproblematic to you that studying the English language is simply that – studying any aspect of the English language. However, ‘the English language’ is not in itself a neatly identifiable entity: what counts as English is not straightforward. Consider the view ‘English is the language of England’. As we shall see in this book, the roots of English are not in England at all, but in the old dialects of what is now north-western Germany. Once it became established in Britain, it was relatively restricted geographically: in the sixteenth century there were approximately 3 million speakers of English, nearly all indeed based in England. However, today there are well over 300 million native speakers of English, not to mention a further 300 million regularly speaking it as a second language (i.e., in addition to their native language), and the huge number of people learning it as a foreign language, mainly to communicate with other non-native speakers of English (there are more Chinese people learning English than there are native speakers of English in the United States!). Thus, most English is produced, heard and read outside England. Take the example of the Egyptian airline pilot landing at Frankfurt airport in Germany, and talking to air traffic control in English. For that pilot, English is the language used for communication in that context – it has nothing to do with England (except for its distant historical connection). English has emerged as a global *lingua franca*, that is, a language used throughout the world as a means of facilitating communication between speakers of different languages. Consider the view ‘English has a common core of words and structures that are recognized as being English’. In fact, not everybody would recognize the same things as being English, something which we will discuss and illustrate in Chapter 12. One might appeal to some notion such as **Standard English**, claiming it represents the common core. However, most English is **spoken**: accents vary and, in a global perspective, they vary widely. At best we can say that certain groups of English accents tend to share certain features. And there is the issue of what is meant by ‘standard’. Appeals to such notions frequently slide from talk of a uniform set of features to talk

of a set of features which a particular group considers best. For example, whilst it may indeed be possible to identify a set of standard grammatical and spelling features for British written English, that set would not be the same for American written English. So, which Standard English should we follow? Answers to that question typically involve the social evaluation of language (e.g., British people tend to think that the British ‘standard’ is ‘best’).

To study anything requires that there be an object to study. If we cannot agree about what constitutes English, how can we study it? The answer is simply to accept that there are various views as to what counts as English. Although there is often considerable agreement within these views, flowing from them are different conceptions as to the boundaries of English, how the language is constituted, and also how we might study it. These views fall into three groups, the second of which contains a number of notable sub-groups (our use of the word ‘English’ below denotes a language that might be labelled as such by a community of people):

1 The folk view. In fact, we have already touched on folk views about English in our first paragraph. There, we expressed beliefs about English in quotation marks. Many such beliefs have a prescriptive quality – they are beliefs about how English should be. For example, people tend to believe that English pronunciation, or at least the best English pronunciation, should reflect spelling. As we shall see in Chapters 2 and 12, nobody speaks English in a way which corresponds with spelling in a simple manner: even Queen Elizabeth II herself would not pronounce the <d> of the word *and* in the phrase ‘fish and chips’, and it is in fact speakers of *less* prestigious regional accents (in England, at least) who would pronounce the <r> in words like *sort*. Studying English from the point of view of folk beliefs and ‘correctness’ not only involves examining the truth of a particular belief (i.e., whether it is a myth), but also considers the real effects that having that belief in the first place can have on the language, its social contexts and the people who speak it. We will do this at various points in this book.

2 The academic views. These can be considered under four headings:

- **The comparative view.** In this perspective, any study that reveals similarities or differences between English and another language can contribute to an understanding of how it is constituted (i.e., its distinctive nature). Many studies focus on formal structures (e.g., the grammar, semantics and phonology) of English in comparison with those of other languages, but it is also possible to study the use of language in English-speaking countries or cultures and contrast it with the use of language elsewhere (contrasting, for example, how people are ‘polite’ in different languages and cultures).
- **The variational view.** In this perspective, any study that considers the nature of the varieties of English can contribute to an understanding of how it is constituted. Such varieties can be distinguished **synchronically** (i.e., how they vary at one point in time, for example, how they make up different accents or written genres) or **diachronically** (how they vary over time, thus

feeding into the history of English). It is worth noting here that English, as with other languages, is made up of its own distinctive varieties, especially spoken varieties (e.g., accents), and has its own distinctive history.

- **The structural view.** In this perspective, any study that considers the nature of the specific structures (e.g., words, sounds) of English can contribute to an understanding of how it is constituted. This view is a relatively weak view of the study of English in the sense that some of the phenomena discussed may also be characteristics of other languages. Thus, for example, a study of nouns using English data (perhaps for reasons of convenience) may reveal certain characteristics of English nouns, but it may well be the case that at least some of those characteristics are shared with other languages. In this respect, this view differs from the comparative view.
- **The social (context) view.** In this perspective, any study that considers the nature of the specific social contexts in which English occurs (and with which it interacts) can contribute to an understanding of how English is constituted. Here, the focus is on the *use* of English and its associated social contexts, including both how English is shaped by the social contexts and how English shapes social contexts. For example, there are linguistic differences which relate to the formality of a situation (a job interview vs. family chat) and the roles speakers have (the defendant vs. the judge). As speakers, we can completely change the context through our choice of words – for example, the decision to swear could reduce formality (and have other far-reaching consequences). This view is also a relatively weak view of the study of English in the sense that some of the social and interactive phenomena discussed may also be the same for other languages.

3 The educational view. For millions of people around the world, studying English does not mean enhancing one's abstract understanding of English, as with academic views, but enhancing one's ability to put it into practice – to speak it, write it and understand it. 'It' here, as propagated in textbooks and educational materials, is usually a standard written English and a prestigious accent (e.g., Received Pronunciation). Enhancing readers' abilities in this way is not the prime focus of this book. However, it is important to note that a further academic perspective pertains here, namely, studying the teaching and learning of English, particularly, but not exclusively, in educational contexts. We will address this area in the final section of this book.

All the above views overlap. Note, for example, that the academic study of folk views could be considered a sub-category of the social (context) view. Our book does not espouse one particular view, but embraces all of them. That way, we hope that our understanding of English is enriched.

Where does English language study take place? Addressing this question can help reveal other things about the subject. In the UK, North America, Australia and New Zealand, it typically takes place in departments of English, English literature, linguistics or linguistics and English language; in other countries, it also appears in departments of English linguistics or English philology. These labels reflect two pertinent issues. The first issue concerns a terminological problem: does the word 'English' encompass English literature,

English language or both? Some departments labelled ‘English’ are relatively little concerned with language, focusing mainly on English literature in terms of literary theory. This does not mean simply analysing a certain body of texts, but considering who wrote them, who they are written for, the social and political contexts in which they were written, and so on. There is no denying that English literature is worth studying, if only on the grounds that the works studied are generally considered to have cultural value. However, English literature accounts for only a relatively small proportion of the language that people consider to be English – it can hardly represent the English language as a whole. The language of English literature is represented in this volume (see Chapter 26), as are the many other varieties that comprise the English language. The second issue concerns the relationship between English and linguistics. Linguistics, in its broadest definition, is the study of language or languages, along with phenomena pertinent to language(s). So, linguistics as a discipline is clearly broader than the study of English language. Most obviously, it is not primarily focused on language that people would label English. Moreover, it is focused on the fundamental – and in some cases perhaps even universal – mechanisms of language, often drawing theoretical backing from cognitive or social sciences. Consider, for example, the fact that research has revealed that bilinguals store the lexical inventories of the languages they speak in different parts of the brain. This runs counter to what one might imagine to be a more efficient arrangement, whereby particular concepts (e.g., a ‘table’) are straightforwardly ‘hot wired’ to one ‘lexicon’ (or dictionary) containing all the possible words (in the languages known to the particular speaker) for each concept. This fact in itself has no particular bearing on the nature of English, or indeed any other specific language: it is an insight into a general linguistic mechanism. Having said that, to study the English language is also to study a language. In our view, it is impossible to study the English language without also doing linguistics. We need to be aware of how language works in general, and we need to be able to evaluate our frameworks and tools for language analysis in particular, if we are going to investigate a language and in particular to address the issue of why it is as it is. We should stress that we are not attempting to cover all of linguistics as a discipline, but rather we emphasize areas of linguistics pertinent to the study of the English language.

The up-coming chapters

The chapters are organized under six major headings. The first group appears under English: Structure. This section includes many of the traditional areas of linguistics relating to, for example, English phonology, grammar and semantics. One of the functions of these chapters in Part 1 is to provide you with a basis in language description, which will set you up for later chapters in the book that draw upon aspects of that description. The second group, Part 2 under English: History, addresses diachronic variation in English; in other words, the history of English. This is organized according to linguistic area, rather than periods in the history of English, for the reason that this better suits the focus of this book. The following two groups of chapters

appear under English Speech: Regional and Social Variation in Part 3 and English Writing: Style, Genre and Practice in Part 4. These focus on synchronic variation in English. The chapters dealing with genre and practice pave the way for a transition to Part 5 and the next group of chapters, which appear under English: Communication and Interaction. Here, the focus is on the use of English in social context(s). The final group of chapters, in Part 6 under English: Learning and Teaching, considers the learning and teaching of English, both outside and inside educational contexts.

The chapters are written so that they should be understandable by a first year undergraduate, but there is plenty of potential for the content of the chapters to support courses pitched at more senior undergraduates, or even as preliminary steps for postgraduates, to whom the research-led nature of the chapters should appeal. With a few exceptions, each chapter has the same structure. In particular, chapters typically conclude on a more research-oriented note. Each chapter contains one or more boxes, which may be of two kinds. **Advances Boxes** are like an aside. If you decided to skip them, the rest of the text will still make perfect sense. They are pitched at a somewhat higher-level readership, or at least contain a particularly close focus that you would not expect in an introductory text. They are designed to give readers a sense of controversies and debates, complications and problems, further research, and so on. **Illustration Boxes** contain extended examples (or a set of shorter examples), additional examples (plus, optionally, some analysis of them), and sometimes further elaboration on an issue. Each chapter ends with some recommendations for further readings.

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